

IT Corner – July 2003

Piracy Rant

Introduction

As many of you are aware I am a very strong advocate of paying for legal copies of software. This seems to cause many people to chuckle and nod their heads in understanding while they go off to the market to pick up Microsoft Office (a £300 product) for 100D or 200D. I thought I might share with you some of my thoughts on this matter. You can read them or skip this section of my column, it is up to you.

First, a bit about me: I have a formal degree in Computer Science obtained while I was living in Canada. For the first few years of my obtaining my degree I spent a lot of time both designing and writing computer software. An average amount of time for me to spend on designing and writing a medium-sized piece of software would be about six months and most likely I would have support from a number of other team members. Obviously, in order to be able to eat while we did this we were paid for our efforts. I would also be the first to admit that we were paid WELL, however, if the software we wrote was simply taken and sold on the street for next to nothing I would be 1) offended and 2) EXTREMELY upset to see my efforts being valued for so little.

When you buy a piece of computer software you are buying a *product*. This product (unless it is explicitly documented) is meant to be installed on one computer only – that is what you are paying for. Making a copy of the computer program stored on the CD (or diskettes) is the same as copying a CD of music or a video cassette (both are illegal in most countries). Installing the program on more than one computer is the same as making these illegal copies since the program was only ever intended for one computer.

Excuses

When people buy pirated (illegally copied) versions of software, they commonly say to me “The company [that wrote the software] does not care about one illegal copy” or (more commonly here) “It is difficult and too expensive to get legal copies of software” or “I bought it legally with my money from this guy in the market...”. Let’s address each of these issues in turn:

“The company does not care about one illegal copy” - While this may be true in an individual case as you well know one plus another, plus another adds up to a whole lot more than one or two illegal copies.

“It is difficult and too expensive to get legal copies of software” – This is particularly true here in The Gambia where it seems that it is next to impossible to get LEGAL versions of software – Companies insist that the software they provide is “covered by a site license” (which is patently not true, according to Microsoft South Africa) or is “perfectly legal”. I have found that it IS possible to obtain LEGAL versions of software for use here in The Gambia – You just have to INSIST on it. This normally means requiring ORIGINAL installation CDs and a license certificate (a piece of paper or a sticker with, in the case of Microsoft, a hologram and serial number on it). My personal opinion is that as a development worker it is an important thing for me to set an example for how things should be done, buying legal software being one of those things. As to the expense, when purchasing new computers there are special deals made by software manufacturers with suppliers to supply their software at reduced cost if it is “pre-installed” (though certificates, original software and serial numbers should still be provided). This is a SIGNIFICANTLY reduced cost (less than £100 for Microsoft Office, for example).

“I bought it legally with my money from this guy in the market...” – Most of the time it is very easy to tell if the software is illegal. How can you tell if a particular copy of software is illegal? Well, it is easy if it has a hand-written label or a photocopy of a label and looks obviously unprofessional. There are copies of software that look completely legitimate so manufacturers often provide information on how you can tell if

the copy is legitimate or not (for example, see the Microsoft web site below for details). It is up to YOU to look at the software to see if it is a legal copy or not – If the price is too good to be true, it probably is!

Bottom Line

Let's face it, the bottom line is:

- *Buying illegal copies of software is wrong. **This is stealing.***
- *Installing the same copy of software on multiple computers is wrong. **This is also stealing.***

You might say, "Steve should come off his high-horse and live in the real world", but I would suggest to you that I practice what I preach: ALL of my software installed on my personal computers is legal (I have the original licenses and software to prove it) and I also insist that all the software I install is also legal. Yes, it is sometimes difficult, but it is also the right thing to do.

Related web sites:

Microsoft's Piracy Web Site - <http://www.microsoft.com/piracy>
Business Software Alliance - <http://www.bsa.org>

Computer Equipment Protection

Well, now that the rainy season is on us I thought I would talk a bit about how you can protect your computer equipment from lightening and other dangers.

The suggested solution for most computers used in this country is (in order from the wall outlet to your computer):

1. A power strip WITH fuse (that is NOT by-passed by using a wire).
2. A line conditioner or voltage regulator (these are those blue boxes you see with a dial on the front).
3. A UPS (preferably 650 or better) connected to both the computer and monitor (printers should be connected to a "pass through" connection, if present, since they would seriously drain the UPS battery if directly connected).

When the power goes out, it is important that you turn off the computer, UPS, line conditioner, power strip and (to be completely sure) un-plug the power strip from the wall. It is also important to remember that if you are using an external modem you should make sure you unplug the power supply from the wall. Using ANY modem you should disconnect it from the telephone outlet as well when not in use (this is particularly true during thunderstorms).

Our office has just moved in Banjul to an area that has VERY low voltage that has been causing serious damage to our protective equipment. This is caused particularly by LOW voltage. When the power is low the UPSs supply the extra power, causing the batteries to be constantly draining (which they are NOT meant to do). This is a bit of a problem since a voltage regulator will only "even out" the voltage but not give us extra power to run our equipment. We are facing the prospect of having to move since the likelihood of us acquiring a generator is quite small. The concern is that even if we lose just one computer due to voltage damage the cost of that computer alone is enough to justify our moving.

News

- Hi-Tech Engineering have moved their offices from Bakau to Kairaba Avenue on the corner opposite the mosque and Palais du Chocolat.
- QuantumNet have moved their offices from New Town Road to Kairaba Avenue opposite the Latrikunda Secondary School (in the new "Electric" building).

- As normal the “Steve Rice Computer Fix-It Service” operates at the cost of one meal per problem fixed (cost negotiable)

As per normal, let me know if there are any topics you would like me to discuss/address in this column.

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